



A handful of legal Travellers' homes still remain at the site, while around them the council clears the area. Photograph by Andy Hall

## Yards from Dale Farm, the standoff simmers on

Evicted Travellers remain close by the site as more legal battles loom

by Mark Townsend

The same old faces were there yesterday, gathered by the entrance to Dale Farm. Ten days after their eviction, Travellers have decamped a mere 50 metres away.

A decade-long legal battle with Basildon council that could cost up to £18m has so far moved them just a minute's walk away, the Travellers say. "It must be the most expensive 50-metre walk in the history of Basildon for taxpayers. We're all still here," said Candy Sheridan, vice-chair of the Gypsy Council.

The consensus among the 86 families forced from the six-acre Essex site after losing a high court hearing is that they will still be there in 10 years – a stance that threatens a further standoff.

Among the caravans crammed onto the sloping roadside leading out of Dale Farm, the mood remains defiant. Another legal skirmish is imminent. The council is thought to be preparing 48-hour enforcement notices to remove some of the evicted families out of the "legal" Traveller camp on its periphery, on grounds of congestion.

Appeals have already been drawn up in response. "It's Tony Ball [leader of Basildon council] trying to save face. He's spent all that money and for what? People will see us a stone's throw from the site and wonder what that was all about," said Michelle Sheridan, who has lived at Dale Farm for nine years.

Cranes continued destroying the concrete pitches on Friday. More than 40 of 49 plots are now fenced off and guarded by bailiffs, with the place labelled a "con-

struction" or "eviction" site, depending on which side is talking.

Even the actual manner of the clearance is becoming controversial. Travellers claim the council has contravened court orders stipulating that 10 metres of the Dale Farm pitches should be dug out, pointing to areas where less than a tenth of that depth has been removed. Another issue, claim campaigners, is that a two-metre high mound of turf dumped by the council around the perimeter is

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Candy Sheridan, Gypsy Council

not covered by the court order.

And then there are the bats. Last week Travellers said bats were seen roosting in cottage roofs at the rear of the site, raising the prospect of further delays as they are a protected species. Experts were seen inspecting the roofs on Friday.

Ultimately, Dale Farm is to be returned to the green belt, but many are sceptical, saying the ground, a former scrapyard, is too polluted. The court ordered the walls and gates that mark the deserted plots to remain in place, and many fear the site will become a massive fly-tipping zone.

But at least peace prevails. Police patrol the site, but it is rumoured that 100 bailiffs were stood down after fears

of fresh violence proved unfounded. The next battle is likely to be confined to the courtroom, with evicted families considering individual legal actions against the council. "We need to make sure they never do this again to Travellers," said one, who requested anonymity.

So far, three of the original Dale Farm pitches have been allowed to remain. A fourth is being sought for a 61-year-old man with cancer who wants to spend the remainder of his life at his old home. "We'll see whether they give a dying man his wishes," said Michelle Sheridan.

Plans to find new homes for others could follow. Candy Sheridan has identified at least nearby two plots, but says the council has been slow to act.

Many of the evicted cannot forgive David Cameron for his remarks in parliament that "those people should move away". And relations between Travellers and council have been poisoned. Accusations of racism hang heavy after Rodney Bass, chairman of Essex county council, referred to "Irish criminals" at the site in a letter to the mayor of Basildon. That anger mounted when the deputy leader of Basildon Council, Stephen Horgan, described Dale Farm as a slum.

Yvonne MacNamara, director of the Irish Traveller Movement in Britain, described the comments as astonishing, saying they show the council "was never interested in addressing the shortage of Traveller sites in the area, which is the root cause of the humanitarian crisis at Dale Farm". The Gypsy Council said Travellers' rights had been jeopardised.

A Basildon council spokesman said: "We are doing everything by the book."



Goalkeepers are more prone to abuse because they are so close to the fans, says David James. Photograph by Tom Jenkins

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